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Durenberger denies criticism of Reagan

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P MINNEAPOLIS — Sen. Dave Durenberger, Minnesota Republican, described as "patently not true" news reports last week quoting him as saying President Reagan "doesn't know what the hell is going on."

While Mr. Reagan may at one time have been out of touch on the Iran arms episode, he is now "on top of his game," Mr. Durenberger said.

He spoke at a church Sunday in suburban Minneapolis.

After his talk, Mr. Durenberger tried to explain a second controversial statement last week to a Jewish audience in Palm Beach, Fla., suggesting that the United States collects intelligence in Israel.

Mr. Durenberger, former chairman of the Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence, said he did not intend to lend credibility to reports of U.S. espionage in Israel or to justify the espionage in the United States for which Israeli agent Jonathan Jay Pollard was convicted.

The Jewish community is concerned about the effects of the Pollard case on U.S.-Israel relations, and Mr. Durenberger said his remarks were aimed at "a broadening of peoples' understanding" at a time when "everyone had been dumping all over Israel."

Top Israeli and U.S. officials have denied reports, relayed by Mr. Durenberger to the Jewish audience, that a disenchanted Israeli official in 1982 volunteered to provide the United States with classified information.

Of the remark about President Reagan, Mr. Durenberger confirmed as accurate another quotation in the news report that "a thousand people in Washington" knew more than Mr. Reagan about the details and significance of the Iran arms sales.

But Mr. Durenberger said his staff is trying to track down the origin of the "what the hell" quotation.

Mr. Durenberger, suggesting he had been misinterpreted, said he told reporters they were out to "trap



Sen. Dave Durenberger

[Reagan] into saying 'yes' or 'no' to something, so that a month from now you can say it just wasn't true."

Mr. Durenberger has sounded both critical and supportive of Mr. Reagan at various stages of the Iran story. But both of those impressions are based on Mr. Durenberger's assertion Mr. Reagan knew little about what was happening, a premise that makes the president appear innocent of willful wrongdoing, if somewhat out of touch.

Mr. Durenberger told the Minnesota congregation Mr. Reagan reached a low point emotionally recently because of a series of setbacks.

These included the failure to bring home an arms-control agreement after the Iceland summit, the loss of the Senate to Democrats in the 1986 elections, and then the Iran arms-sales incident.

By replacing White House Chief of Staff Don Regan with former Sen. Howard Baker, Mr. Durenberger said, the president "went right back up and so he's on top of his game, I should say, right now."

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